Yoga Jam: Remixing *kīrtan* in the Art of Living

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Abstract: *Yoga Jam are a group of musicians ~~in~~ the United Kingdom who are active members of the Art of Living, a transnational Hindu-derived meditation group. Yoga Jam organize events—also referred to as yoga raves and yoga remixes—that combine Hindu devotional songs (*bhajans*) and chants (*mantras*) with modern Western popular musical genres, such as soul, rock, and particularly electronic dance music. This hybrid music is often played in a clublike setting, and dancing is interspersed with yoga and meditation. Yoga jams are creative fusions of what at first sight seem to be two incompatible phenomena—modern electronic dance music culture and ancient yogic traditions. However, yoga jams make sense if the Durkheimian distinction between the sacred and the profane is challenged, and if tradition and modernity are not understood as existing in a sort of inverse relationship. This paper argues that yoga raves are authenticated through the somatic experience of the modern popular cultural phenomenon of clubbing combined with therapeutic yoga practices and validated by identifying this experience with a reimagined Vedic tradition.*

Keywords: *yoga, electronic dance music, authenticity, sacred/profane, tradition/modernity, wellbeing spirituality, Art of Living Foundation*

Introduction

A new phenomenon seems to be sweeping across the world—variously called yoga raves, yoga remixes, or yoga jams. This phenomenon takes the idea of an electronic dance party event and combines it with yoga and meditation. The music at yoga raves/jams consists predominantly of Hindu devotional songs (*bhajans*) and chants (*mantras*) set to Western popular musical genres such as soul, rock, and, in particular, electronic dance music (EDM). While widespread, this syncretic phenomenon has been particularly popular with participants in a transnational Hindu-derived meditation movement known as the Art of Living Foundation, henceforth simply referred to as AOL, which was founded in 1981 by Sri Sri Ravi Shankar—not to be confused with the sitar player (see Jacobs 2015, 75).

Yoga jams have found a place in the package of therapeutic spiritual practices of AOL for a number of reasons. First, AOL is a global and cosmopolitan movement. Cosmopolitanism—the acknowledgement of universal abstract values such as human rights—is, according to Fukyuki Kurasawa (2004, 239), "geographically and culturally disembedded," is culturally "thin," and consequently is unable to satisfy more substantial existential needs, particularly in relation to identity formation. While, on one hand, AOL discourse is thin—for example, advocating universal human values—it paradoxically suggests that this idea is rooted in the ancient Vedic tradition.[1] In other words, AOL claims its therapeutic spiritual practices to be both universal and authentic, as they are embedded in a specific cultural tradition. We will see this interplay between the universal and the particular in the representation of the sonic

properties of Sanskrit chants—the idea that certain sounds have a transformative power (discussed in detail below)—used in yoga jams.

Since colonial times, there has been a trend in which Hindus have rearticulated many aspects of tradition to maintain relevance in a rapidly changing context. What might be identified as the reinvention of tradition in groups such as AOL has found resonance within both the Hindu community—both in India and in diaspora—desiring a strong but apposite religious identity, and among seekers outside the Hindu community who perceive Indian culture as a panacea for the anomie of modern Western cultures. Yoga jams exemplify this yearning for cultural practices that are perceived as relevant and yet rooted in tradition.

The discourses of groups such as AOL and the rationale underlying yoga jams are consistent with therapeutic discourses, which, as Eva Illouz (2008, 9) observes, have "mustered an enormous cultural relevance." AOL can be considered as what Paul Heelas (2008, 52–54) has termed wellbeing spirituality. Spirituality is often represented as an inward turn, and as locating your authentic inner self as a means of transforming your individual life, and is therefore often articulated in terms of personal wellbeing. However, Heelas (2008, 53) reminds us that wellbeing spirituality is a holistic discourse that includes mind and body as well as spirit. Yoga jams, which play on the physical, emotional, and spiritual aspects of music and dance, are congruent with the discourses of wellbeing spirituality. Heelas (2008, 53) observes that wellbeing spirituality, although a project concerned with personal wellbeing, is "conceived to be relational rather than unduly individualistic or solitary." Consequently, yoga jams, which are inherently communal events, also provide the relational dimension that practicing yoga or mediation as a solitary activity does not.

Furthermore, music and dance are of course fun—so yoga jams are both enjoyable and edifying. In the introduction to a recent collection of essays on "practical spiritualities," the editors suggest that spirituality is "physiological—fermented in the vessel of flesh through everyday practices imbued with extraordinary meaning" (Coats and Emerich 2016, 3). Popular cultural phenomena, particularly those that have a somatic aspect such as dance, are therefore particularly open to being imbued with extraordinary meaning.

This paper extends the argument posited by commentators such as Conrad Ostwalt (2012) that religion and popular culture are increasingly imbricated in the modern context. According to Ostwalt (2012, 24) "in contemporary American society there is no doubt that religion has changed: that an intimate relationship exists between religion and popular cultural forms." If there is a growing convergence between religion and popular culture, as Ostwalt suggests, then wellbeing spirituality is even more enmeshed in popular culture. John Mihelich and Jennifer Gatzke (Mihelich and Gatzke 2007) observe that "in an expansive quest for spiritual sources, some people have found spiritual relevance in popular culture." Participants in yoga jams and raves have found this spiritual relevance in a modified form of electronic dance events.

However, clubbing, while fun, and wellbeing spirituality, while therapeutic, are perceived as culturally vacuous. Authenticity, as Charles Lindholm (2008, 25) observes, can be either romantic/expressive or historical/genealogical. The romantic/expressive mode of authenticity is related to the individual, the spontaneous, and the experiential. The historical/genealogical mode is related to continuity, culture, and tradition. Yoga jams are authenticated through both the romantic/expressive mode and the historical/genealogical mode, which mutually reinforce each other. The "I feel" of the somatic and emotional experience of the yoga jam is validated through being articulated, in both senses of the word, with a reimagined Vedic culture. Conversely, Vedic culture is made relevant by linking it with the experiential dimension of the yoga jam.

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The phenomenon of yoga raves and jams clearly indicates that Émile Durkheim's distinction between the sacred and the profane is no longer tenable, if it ever was. In his seminal text *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, first published in 1912, Durkheim claims that

> All known religious beliefs, whether simple or complex, present a common quality: they presuppose a classification of things—the real or ideal things that men represent for themselves—into two classes, two opposite kinds, generally designated by the words *profane* and *sacred*.[2] (Durkheim 2001, 36)

Durkheim (2001, 39) argues that "the two worlds are not only conceived as separate, but as hostile and jealous rivals." In a Durkheimian model, yoga, as both a philosophy and a practice, would be classified as sacred. However, rave culture, as an antinomian leisure pursuit, would be classified as profane and therefore inherently hostile to the sacred. However, there is a growing body of work that suggests that when we investigate religion as a lived reality, it is not always readily distinguished from other aspects of everyday life. As Nancy T. Ammerman (2014, 190–191) has observed, lived religion involves "material and embodied aspects" and "includes the physical and artistic things people do together, such as singing, dancing, and other folk or community traditions that enact a spiritual sense of solidarity and transcendence" (see also McGuire 2008, Partridge 2012, Gray-Hildenbrand and Smith Roberts 2016). This intrinsic entanglement of the sacred and everyday embodied and material practices is particularly apparent in discourses of wellbeing spirituality. Appropriating the often-cited observation of Raymond Williams that culture is ordinary, Curtis Coats and Monica Emerich (Coats and Emerich 2016, 13) observe, "spirituality is ordinary. Spirituality is not something set aside or cordoned off as 'the sacred.'"

For example, EDM events are often interpreted as liminal spaces that have the potential for transcendent experiences. So, one participant observes,

> [Ravers] experience deep feelings of unlimited compassion and love for everyone around them … For a few hours they are able to leave behind a world full of contradiction, conflict and confusion, and enter a universal realm where everyone is truly equal, a place where peace, love, unity and respect are the laws of the land. (Fritz 1999, cited in St John 2008, 154)

Conversely, religious groups utilize popular cultural forms to express their religious identities and/or reach out to others. For example, Amy McDowell (2014) explores how Christian Hardcore and Muslim Taqwacore 'use subcultural music to express religion in unconventional ways and venues' (McDowell 2014, 255).[3]

The discourse that suggests that yoga jam/raves are spiritually and therapeutically effective because of the sonic properties of Sanskrit also challenges the dichotomy between tradition and modernity. In his classic study of Middle Eastern societies, Daniel Lerner (1958) claims that there is a sort of inverse relationship between tradition and modernity. In the introduction to a collection of essays on detraditionalization, Paul Heelas (1996b, 2) indicates that one way to understand the erosion of tradition is that it "involves a shift of authority from 'without' to 'within.' It entails the decline of the belief in pre-given or natural order of things." However, as Barbara Adam (1996) argues, in her essay in Heelas's collection, it is "not the replacement of tradition, order and control by reflexivity, disorder, flux and uncertainty, but their simultaneous existence and their mutual implication, therefore, need to become the focus." Yoga jams, on one hand, can be located in the therapeutic turn of contemporary cultures, where the individual experience is paramount—or as Philip Rieff

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(1966, 22) suggests "[the] 'I believe,' the cry of the ascetic, lost precedence to 'one feels,' the caveat of the therapeutic." It is clear that participants in yoga jams seek an individual, personal experience. However, this personal experiential dimension is understood in terms of a rather traditional Hindu understanding of the sacred power of sound. Consequently, I argue that the phenomenon of yoga jams and raves challenges "ingrained distinctions between orthodox and popular religion, sacred and profane practice, and even religion and culture" (Bender, Cadge, Levitt, and Smilde 2012, 7).

Methodology

This paper is part of a larger ethnographic research project on the Art of Living Foundation, which involved attending numerous Art of Living events and participating in courses in the United Kingdom, India, and Germany, talking with participants, and over thirty semi-structured qualitative interviews. This paper is more specifically based on participant observation of the Yoga Jam organized as part of the Fringe Festival in Brighton in the United Kingdom in May 2013. As I had already begun my research into AOL, I heard about the event through being on the e-mail list for AOL members in the United Kingdom. Earlier in the year, there was an e-mail request for volunteers to help set up and organize the Yoga Jam. I offered my time to help set up the venue. So early in the morning of the day, I found myself at the Old Market, an independent theater near the center of Brighton. AOL is highly dependent on volunteers to organize and run its events and charitable projects. Consequently, volunteering is an inherent aspect of active participation in AOL, and is referred to by the Sanskrit term *seva*—often translated as "service" (see Jacobs 2015, 111). I found that actively volunteering for various tasks facilitated access and acceptance by participants in AOL. I was also conscious that the possibility for conversations would be very limited during the evening of the Yoga Jam itself. Most of the day was taken up draping the venue with saris, garlands of plastic flowers, and images of trees and lotuses coloured with UV reflective paint, all of which had to be sprayed with fire retardant. There were five volunteers from the local AOL group when the theatre was opened, but gradually through the day more AOL volunteers drifted in from further afield. While everybody was very busy, I did have the opportunity to talk with many of these volunteers about the Yoga Jam. After helping prepare the Market Hall all day, I was present and fully participated in the Yoga Jam, which included guided meditation, yoga, and dancing to both a live band and DJs.

Shortly after the event itself, I conducted four in-depth qualitative interviews specifically about the Yoga Jam. The first two interviews were conducted in Brighton with the organizers of the Yoga Jam. The interviewees were a young couple who had both been active members of the local AOL group. Neither Ed nor his wife Malindi had organized anything like this before, but they had been inspired by attending a Yoga Jam in London. The Brighton event itself was very much their idea. However, the Yoga Jam group of musicians—who are based in London and are very active participants in AOL—were very much central not only to the Brighton event, but also to organizing Yoga Jams throughout the United Kingdom at events such as the OM Yoga Show in Kensington. Consequently, I interviewed two of the founders and leading members of the Yoga Jam crew—as they like to refer to themselves. Sachin, an independent businessman who is very involved in AOL, is the frontman for the Yoga Jam crew and compères the events. Bhavini, who, because of her parents' involvement, grew up with AOL as part of her life, now teaches yoga for AOL and is the lead singer of the Yoga Jam crew.

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Yoga Raves and the Art of Living

Yoga raves were started in 2007 by an Argentinean duo (Rodrigo Bustos and Nikolás Pucci), both active members of AOL, who call themselves So What. AOL appeals to an educated, urbanised South Asian middle class in both India and the diaspora, and equally to individuals who are not from a Hindu background, but are seeking a sense of psychological and spiritual wellbeing—or what elsewhere I have called therapeutic solutions to the perceived malaises of modern Western societies (Jacobs 2014). Yoga raves/jams remix the cultures in a form that has appeal to both these constituencies—they are pertinent to the modern world and are perceived as offering an escape from the iron cage of modernity. Yoga jams/raves are rooted in the Vedic tradition, but are not mere superstition, as they are validated through quasi-positivist and pseudo-scientific ideas, as well as the personal experiences of participants. The proof of the jam—if you like—is in the positive sense of wellbeing experienced by participants and in notions about the authenticity of tradition and the physics of vibration.

So What regularly organize yoga raves and have also released two audio CDs: *Smile* in 2009 and *Blossom* in 2012. On the So What Web site they describe their act:

> So What Project! Composes and plays live on stage a remarkable kind of music that sets everybody up their feet to dance and experience the purifying and expanding effect of Sanskrit mantras, putting together a myriad of styles building a bridge with this ancient language of preliminary sounds, a one of kind experience of the YOGA RAVE PARTIES. [So What 2014]

The idea of yoga rave parties caught on, particularly within AOL, and the band Butterthief[4] in the USA and Yoga Jam in the UK began to organize similar events. All the members of Butterthief and Yoga Jam are active participants in AOL. Butterthief sometimes refer to their music as mantra punk. They also tend to refer to the events that they organize as "yoga re-mix—mind–body dance parties." They suggest that these events have "all the energy and excitement of going to the best party you have ever been to, and at the same time it is Zen, peaceful and still" (Butterthief 2014). In the United Kingdom, Yoga Jam suggest that their events are "the creative fusion of contemporary beats & rhythms with ancient Sanskrit mantras, yoga & meditation" (Yoga Jam 2014). Beyond AOL, the kundalini yoga teacher Gloria Latham, who organizes yoga raves all around the world, suggests on her Web site that these events are "a powerfully orchestrated combination of yoga, kriyas and dance which take participants to a state of pure bliss that allows them to release what holds them back and feel truly alive, clear and energized" (Latham 2014). Charu Das, who arranges yoga raves for the Utah branch of the International Society of Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), invites participants to "experience the ecstatic effect of ancient mantras as chanted by saints and sages, set to the modern techno trance dance beats, and in a spiritualized 'yoga' setting" (cited in Smullen 2013). Before turning to a discussion of Yoga Jam, it is important to gain some understanding of the importance of sound and music in the Hindu tradition.

Sound and Music in the Hindu Tradition

The significance of sound in Hindu rituals, or what Guy Beck (2012) has called sonic liturgy, is often neglected in the study of Hinduism. The centrality of sound and music in Hindu devotional practices can be traced back to the Vedic period. The Vedas were in origin oral compositions, and they are sometimes collectively referred to by the Sanskrit term *śruti*—which means "that which is heard"—emphasizing the importance of their sonic qualities. Singing and chanting parts of the Vedas were integral aspects of the complex Vedic rituals.

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The *Sāmaveda*, for example, provides a musical notation for indicating how the Vedic hymns should be sung or chanted during the rituals. The Vedas are significant because, although they are obscure and not many Hindus know much about their content, they act as a symbolic reference point, not only for Hindus, but also for certain aspects of yoga raves. The Vedas are also important because many yoga ravers regard Sanskrit as having unique sonic properties.

Guy Beck (1993) has identified what he has called a sonic theology that runs through the Hindu tradition. This sonic theology, which can be traced back to the Vedas, can also be identified in the discourses of yoga raves. There are three interrelated aspects to this sonic theology that are significant for understanding the phenomenon of yoga raves. First, these texts suggest that sound is both sacred and primordial. This is best illustrated through the sacred syllable OM. For example, the *Katha Upanishad* (2:16) states, "this syllable OM is indeed Brahman."[5] In other words, the sound OM is equated with the fundamental ground of all existence, and therefore creation is primarily a sonic phenomenon. Second, the sonic properties of sound take precedence over semantics, and therefore correct enunciation is more significant than any meaning. Third, sound can have an effect on consciousness. Hence So What's suggestion, in the quotation above, that Sanskrit mantras have "a purifying and expanding effect."

A development of this sonic theology can be seen in many aspects of Hindu traditions, and in particular in the devotional traditions (*bhakti*). The best-known example is ISKCON, whose central practice is chanting the name of Kṛishna. William H. Deadwyler (1996, 81)—an academic and Krishna devotee—states that "Kṛṣṇa *is*[6] his name … The name of Kṛṣṇa is thus considered to be an *avatāra* of Kṛṣna in the form of sound." The belief in the sacred properties of sound has meant that devotional practices frequently include music and chanting. In AOL, while yogic breathing is the central practice, singing and chanting are also incorporated into most ritual events (see Jacobs 2015, 120). Bhavini observes that "AOL is about celebrating life [and] music is naturally a part of that" (personal interview July 2013).

There is one more thing that I need to mention before addressing the main issues, and that is the vexed question of terminology—and in particular the terms *kīrtan* and *bhajan*.[7] These terms are sometimes used interchangeably, but in some contexts have very specific meanings. For clarity, I will use the term *kīrtan* to indicate a devotional gathering to sing in praise of the sacred. *Kīrtan* tends to be a participatory event, which is led by a singer, who often plays a harmonium and is accompanied by various percussion players. The lead singer will sing a short stanza or *mantra,* which is then repeated as a refrain by those in attendance. Although renowned *kīrtan* singers such as Vinod Agarwal often give more concertlike performances with an accompanying chorus of singers repeating the refrain, audience members often also join in. Manish Tandon—Butterthief's vocalist and guitar player—suggests that their events are more like *kīrtan.* "The whole audience is singing, it is not just a performance, we are facilitators for the audience to chant, for the audience to sing, for the audience to dance" (Butterthief 2014). I will utilize the term *bhajans* to indicate the devotional songs themselves.

The term *mantra* is also problematic. In the introduction to the collection of essays *Understanding Mantras,* Harvey Alper (1991, 3–5), observes that there is no clear definition of the term *mantra,* but in this paper I will use the term *mantra* simply to signify the shorter Sanskrit chants.

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Yoga Jam

Yoga Jam is a group of AOL members based in London who have now formed a company that includes a band, DJs, and a yoga teacher, so that they can provide a complete package. The term "rave" is not used as, in the United Kingdom, it has the connotation of EDM events, which are often associated with taking mind-altering drugs—particularly MDMA, more popularly known as ecstasy—and one of the defining features of yoga raves/jams and remixes is that they are alcohol- and drug-free events. The name also distinguishes Yoga Jam from So What. Sachin indicated that he thought the name was "cool" and that young people would understand what it meant. The term "jam," Sachin observed, suggests a combination of aspects, and it is not just about music and dancing (personal interview July 2013). In other words, the term "jam" has connotations of improvisation, conscious bricolage, and something pleasurable.

The intent of the Yoga Jam is to provide drug-free alternative parties that are compatible with spirituality, or, to use Bhavini's words, it is "the best of both worlds" (personal interview July 2013). Partying with a spiritual dimension not only puts one in touch with one's authentic self—a common trope in the discourses of spirituality (see Heelas 1996b)—but also has the potential to bring people from different cultures and ways of life together. This is clearly consistent with the AOL stated aim of creating a "stress-free, violence-free society" and the characterization of humanity as a "one world family"' (see Jacobs 2015, 87).

While Yoga Jam tend to arrange their own independent events and attend festivals such as Alchemy on the South Bank in London, the Yoga Jam in Brighton was organized by the local AOL group as part of the Brighton Fringe Festival in May 2013, and the Yoga Jam crew from London were invited to play. Yoga Jam Brighton was in part organized to raise money for one of AOL's charitable projects, called Prison Smart.[8] Ed indicated that because Brighton had a vibrant alternative scene, he thought that it would it would be open to the idea, and he had "a vision to make [the Yoga Jam] something big and special" (personal interview August 2013).

The flyer for the Yoga Jam, designed by Ed, uses psychedelic graphics that are consistent with the visual iconography of EDM events (see Figure 1). Even the small image of the elephant-headed deity Ganesh at the centre of the flyer is not out of place, as EDM culture often utilizes Hindu images. Hindu iconography has been appropriated by popular culture since the 1960s counterculture. Hindu imagery is particularly noticeable in EDM culture. Techno "pilgrims" returning from the raves on Goa's beaches, bought back with them not only a specific subgenre of EDM known as Goa Trance (see Saldanha 2004) but also visual inspiration from Hindu calendar art, which was readily incorporated into the psychedelic imagery of EDM culture.

As the poster indicates, the Yoga Jam was branded as an "Alcohol Free, Drug Free, Yoga-Fuelled Party." The implication is of course that you do not need MDMA or alcohol to alter your state of consciousness, because you can get "fuelled" simply through yoga and meditation. Since the counterculture, the concept of expanding consciousness has been a significant subcultural trope. Timothy Leary, the guru of psychedelia, famously suggested that "the aim of all Eastern religions, like the aim of LSD, is basically to get high, that is to expand your consciousness and find ecstasy and revelation within" (cited in Leech 1973, 54). Ed suggested that people "get high on yoga and meditation" (personal interview August 2013). The organizers and participants of the Brighton event and the members of the Yoga Jam crew indicated that there was a demand among young people for parties without drugs or drunkenness.

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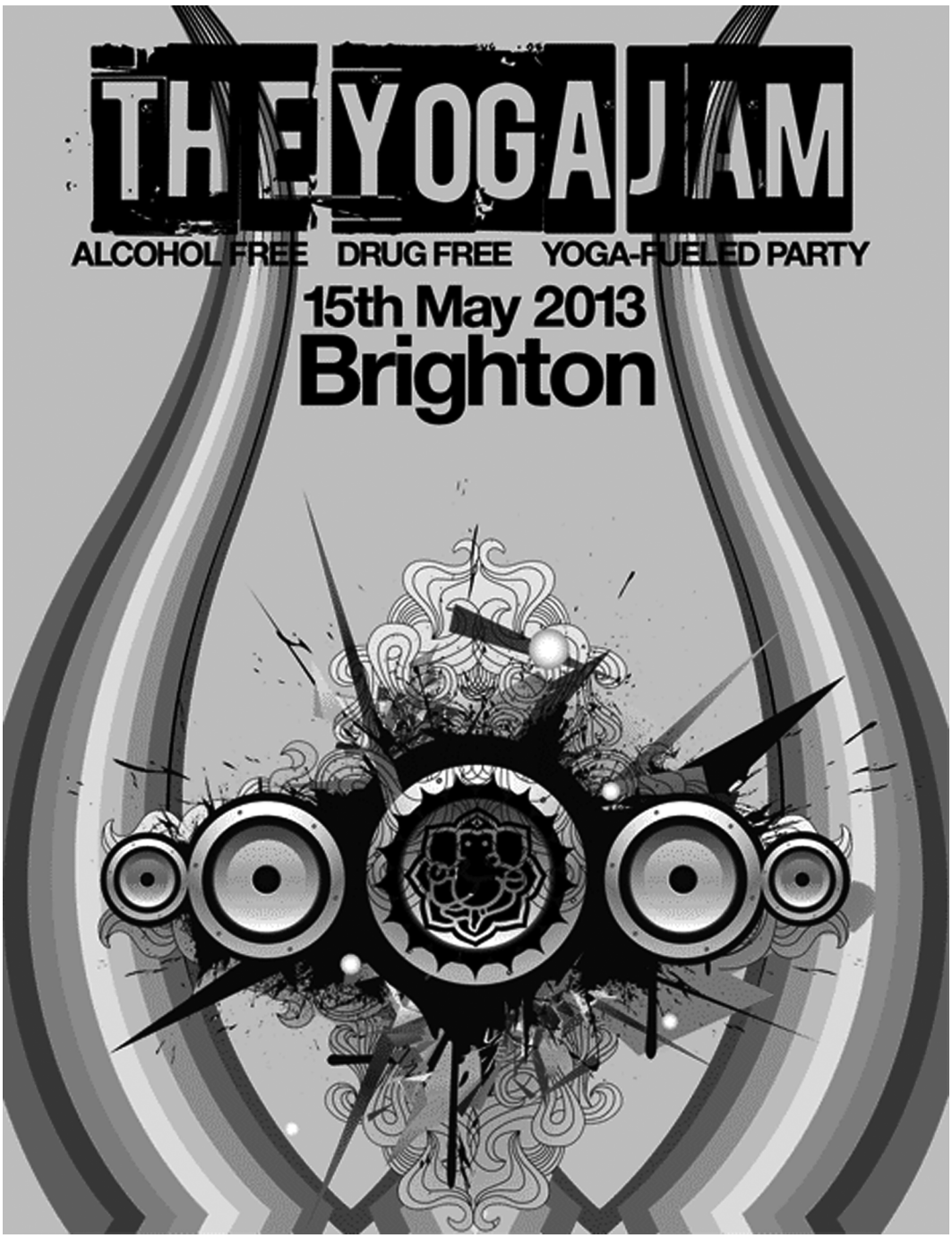

Figure 1. Flyer for the Yoga Jam
Source: Image courtesy of Ed Lower

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The Brighton Yoga Jam was held at the Old Market, an independent theatre. On arrival at the venue, participants were asked to remove their shoes, which automatically differentiated it from a normal club event. Although all EDM events can be perceived as liminal spaces, the removal of shoes emphasized that the venue, at least for the duration of the event, could be considered as sacred space—a space set apart. The transformation of the secular hall into sacred space was further enhanced by the decorations of painted lotuses and trees, and the venue was draped with plastic garlands and saris. There was a bar that only served non-alcoholic drinks, and a chill-out area. Chill-out rooms with comfortable seating and relaxing music where participants can "escape the sensory overload of the main dance floor" (Sylvan 2002, 122) are common features of EDM events. Rupert Till (2010, 163) suggests that "chill out rooms provide the equivalent of prayer and meditation spaces." Face painters and glow sticks were available, which are often available at EDM events, and which emphasize the separation from the mundane world. We see here a convergence in which secular spaces can be transformed into spaces set apart from the quotidian, and the articulation of EDM with Hindu sonic liturgy. Consequently, while there is the appearance of a radical opposition between the sacred and the profane, the intertwining of yoga and rave cultures suggests that the interrelationship is more complex, and the two worlds cannot be seen as "hostile and jealous rivals," as Durkheim (2001, 39) argued. People engage in and conceptualize religion and spirituality in complex ways that confound the distinction between the sacred and profane.

There were about 250 people at the Yoga Jam, whoincluded both Hindu and non-Hindus. The majority of the attendees were participants in AOL or active yoga practitioners. The event began about 7:00 PM and lasted for four hours. This differentiates the Yoga Jam from EDM events, which rarely start before 11:00 PM and frequently carry on all night. The evening began with some gentle yoga. This was followed by several rounds of the popular sequence of yoga postures known as the sun salutation (*suryanamaskar*) to some dance music which gradually increased in tempo. Sachin then announced that there would be a short meditation session. He asked how many of those attending had done any meditation before—about two-thirds to three-quarters of those attending indicated that they had done some meditation. Participants were invited to sit comfortably and were instructed in a short yogic breathing exercise (*pranayama*) called *bhastrika*, which involves forceful exhalation and inhalation while raising the arms up and down. Participants were then invited to close their eyes and chant OM three times. As I indicated above, the mystic syllable OM is regarded as having particularly powerful sonic properties, as it is considered to be the primordial sound of creation. *Bhastrika* and chanting OM almost invariably precede meditation in AOL practice. An audio recording of a guided meditation by Sri Sri Ravi Shankar was played. This recorded meditation was introduced with some gentle Indian-style music, and the voice of Sri Sri Ravi Shankar invited us to sit comfortably with our eyes closed and our bodies relaxed and to take a deep breath in and gently let go. Sri Sri Ravi Shankar's voice periodically interrupted the music with various comments such as "smile—your body is made up of millions and millions of cells, your smile should include all of these cells." The guided meditation lasted about 20 minutes, and when participants were invited to open their eyes, volunteers had knocked balloons into the hall, giving the venue a more party-like atmosphere.

Having been "fuelled" by yoga, the "party" part of the program started, with the Yoga Jam crew—which consisted of guitars, vocals, saxophone, and drums—playing a number of the AOL's most popular *mantras* and *bhajans*, such as *Gurudeva Guru Om*, to Western-style popular music. Sachin described their music as follows:

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> Upbeat kind of Sanskrit *bhajans*—chanting with contemporary beats, which I think is the bridge between the old ancient traditional sound and the new contemporary sound that people hear every day … When you chant certain sounds it has a very positive uplifting effect on your system and when you do it in a group it amplifies [the effect]. (Personal interview July 2013)

Here Sachin emphasizes the ancient Vedic roots of chanting and its relevance to the contemporary context, as well as indicating the relational aspects of collective chanting and its therapeutic impact.

The Yoga Jam set was followed by the DJs and another set by the Yoga Jam crew. The music was interspersed with various short yoga sessions. At one point there was a partner yoga session, which involved doing yoga postures in pairs. Each move was demonstrated by volunteers from a local yoga group, which participants followed as best they could—often collapsing in great amusement. During the evening there were podium dancers, a demonstration of acroyoga—itself a hybrid of acrobatics and yoga, an aerial circus, belly dancers, and a fire act. These displays are clearly derived from psydance events such as the Boom Festivals, where the atmosphere is enhanced by "acrobatic displays, spinning fire staff and twirling LED *poi* with stunning light trail effects" (St John 2012, 1). As one yoga jammer described it:

> Yoga Jam is really on the edge. It is a premium club night with all the bells and whistles, but fuelled by natural energy boosters. ("Yoga Jam" 2013)

Mantras and *bhajans*, played to a modern dance beat, are perceived to be potentially transformative. This combines the idea that Sanskrit has very specific sonic qualities with the vibrant energy of an EDM beat. This transformative quality of sound is combined with yoga and meditation, which is perceived as bringing about a state of what Mircea Eliade (1989b) has called enstasis[9]—by which Eliade means "standing within," residing within one's true self. This putting oneself in touch with one's inner authentic self is an inherent aspect of AOL's discourse and practice. Sachin observed that the aim of Yoga Jam is

> To introduce and create a new trend, a kind of holistic experience. People can have a club like experience with music, DJs and a band, but also have that spiritual aspect of yoga, meditation and Sanskrit chanting. (Personal interview July 2013)

In the following sections I will explore the two apparent dichotomies of the Yoga Jam—the distinction between the sacred and the profane and the discontinuity between tradition and modernity—in greater detail.

The Sacred and the Profane

Conrad Ostwalt (2012) has argued there is a clearly identifiable change in the relationship between religion and popular culture in contemporary societies. "Not only do we see religious institutions becoming more like the secular world, we also see secular forms of entertainment and culture carrying religious messages" (Ostwalt 2012, 50). Consequently, it is hardly surprising that the convergence between the sacred and popular culture provides the conditions for the emergence of creative fusions of what might be considered irreconcilable cultural phenomena. Yoga raves, jams, and remixes seem to confirm Ostwalt's thesis. However, EDM culture is frequently represented as pure hedonism, which involves large gatherings of young people with free availability of mind-altering drugs, such as MDMA. Electronic dance

parties involve loud music and manic dancing through the night. Yoga and meditation are about silence and stillness and accessing the sacred. One would have thought that these two phenomena were totally incommensurate. However, the Yoga Jam crew (2014) capitalize on this contradiction by suggesting that "Yoga Jam presents the perfect blend of sound and silence, movement and stillness." This idea that Yoga Jam involves both movement and stillness was emphasized by all the organizers and members of the Yoga Jam crew that I spoke to. Bhavini suggested that this oscillation between sound/movement and silence/stillness brings about "an awareness of the self and of a greater reality" and facilitates "coming back to the center" (personal interview July 2013).

This idea that Yoga Jam incorporates sound/movement and silence/stillness is often articulated in terms of what AOL calls "keys." These "keys," which I have termed therapeutic *sutras* elsewhere (Jacobs 2015, 89), are quasi-psychological aphorisms that encapsulate AOL's core psycho-spiritual beliefs. In this instance the "key" referred to in relation to the Yoga Jam is that "opposite values are complementary." Bhavini, who was born and bought up in London and still likes to go out clubbing, suggested that dance cultures are not incompatible with what she called a yogic lifestyle. However, the modern yogic lifestyle is somewhat different from what might be called the traditional yogi's way of life. Yoga in its more traditional forms often involves ascetic practices, withdrawal from the world, and the desire for magical powers (*siddhis*) or liberation from the wheel of transmigration. The modern yoga lifestyle, on the other hand, is rearticulated in terms of health and wellbeing. While avoidance of drugs and alcohol, and quite possibly the adoption of a vegetarian diet, is a requisite of the modern yogic lifestyle, it does not require withdrawal from the world. Liberation is not a goal, but feeling good about yourself—physically, emotionally and spiritually—is often the focus. Music and dance can therefore be construed readily as a spiritual practice.

Dancing is of course a major element in EDM culture. Dance is also an integral part of Hindu culture. The devotional (*bhakti*) traditions, as well as involving songs and chanting, can also include and/or make reference to dance. Dance can be an expression of the ecstasy of divine union—as in the image and narrative of Krishna dancing with the milkmaids (*gopis*)—known as *rasa-līlā*. In this narrative the milkmaids are seduced into the forest by the sound of Krishna's flute, and each of them simultaneously perceives that she is dancing with him. Most Hindu deities have representations of them as dancing. Perhaps the most well-known iconographic representation of dance is the image of Shiva as Lord of the Dance (*Naṭarāja*), which represents the dual processes of creation and destruction as a form of dance. Many Hindu temples, particularly in South India, used to have dancers, called *devadāsīs*, and dance was considered a sacred act.[10] In many *kīrtans*, especially those of ISKCON, devotees are often moved to dance. Indeed, during the *kīrtan* at the AOL ashram at Bangalore, many devotees get up and dance ecstatically. Heinrich Zimmer (1972, 151) observes, "like yoga, the dance induces trance ecstasy, the experience of the divine, the realization of one's own secret nature, and, finally, mergence into the divine essence."

Conversely, participants often articulate the rave experience in religious or spiritual terms. One of Robin Sylvan's interviewees observed,

> For a lot of people, it was equal to a religious experience, but they didn't have to follow a religion … On a ritualistic level, going into something and coming out feeling different, or feeling like you had become enlightened in some way … I really feel that the rave parties definitely had an element of ritual to them. I suppose in other circumstances people would say it would be like a religious ritual … You felt very connected to yourself and connected to other people. (Sylvan 2002, 124)

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This understanding of EDM events is an almost textbook exemplar of Victor Turner's tripartite analysis of rituals as separation from the constraints of social structure, liminality, and reintegration (see Turner 1995). Turner suggests that liminality is characterized by what he calls communitas, in which the hierarchical structures of society are held in abeyance. A number of commentators, particularly Graham St John, have noted the similarity between EDM events and religious rituals. Rave parties can be described as "techno-communitas" where participants experience "a direct and immediate abandonment of socioculturally mediated divisions in a place that is no place, and a time that is no time" (St John 2004, 29).

Bhavini, who likes to party, made a similar observation.

> I like the difference between how *sattvic* partying can be, and how non-*sattvic* it might seem to party. But you can really experience everyone's minds coming together, and that is their meditation. (Personal interview July 2013)

Sattva is a term that is used widely in yoga and can be roughly translated as balance and harmony. *Sattva* is contrasted with both *rajas*—which is the quality of energy and passion—and *tamas* – which is the quality of sloth and inertia.[11] One way to describe yoga is as various somatic techniques for developing one's *sattvic* nature, and this, it is suggested, can also be achieved when partying. Consequently, dance parties and yoga are not as incompatible as they might seem at first.

One could consider the *rasa-līlā* as a flute dance music event that only differed from raves in that the dance music was not electronic. If Krishna were to incarnate today, would he be organizing yoga raves? Perhaps Krishna at the turntables is stretching the imagination rather too far, and there are of course differences between yoga raves and the *rasa līlā,* but the point is that hedonism and spirituality are not as incommensurable as some commentators suggest. As one yoga raver from New York suggests,

> Meditation is really discovering the love and the bliss that can be inside, and dancing is such a natural expression of that … Just connecting to the pulse, to the music, it allows that energy that's inside to explode outside. (Cited in Taylor 2012)

In this section, we have seen that in certain contexts sound and movement can collapse the distinction between the sacred and the profane. In those most profane of events, EDM parties, dancing to the syncopated beat of electronic music is often interpreted in quasi-religious terms. In the Hindu traditions, music and dance in certain contexts are conceived as religious practices. Both these ideas—the spirituality of the modern dance floor and the religious connotations of dance in the Hindu traditions—act as validating discourses for the creative fusion of yoga raves/jams as a spiritual practice.

Tradition and Modernity

EDM culture is a thoroughly modern phenomenon. Sarah Thornton argues that club and dance cultures can be deemed to be anti-tradition. She suggests that the transformations that characterize dance cultures 'were not simply a means of *rejuvenation* …[but] a constant search for liberation from tradition' (Thornton 1995, 55). While *kīrtan* is not a static, unchanging phenomenon, it is possible to suggest that it is a traditional form of Hindu devotional practice. What is meant by tradition is a hotly debated topic among academics. However, rather than engage in this debate here, I will take the meaning of tradition to be "anything that is handed down from the past" (Edward Shils, cited in Thompson 1996, 91). Paul

Heelas (1996a) identifies two different conceptions of the relationship between modernity and tradition—the radical thesis and the coexistence thesis. The radical thesis is encapsulated in the title of Daniel Lerner's 1958 publication, *The Passing of Traditional Society*. Anthony Giddens (1990, 3) proposes that "modern social institutions are in some respect unique—distinct from all types of traditional order" and suggests that we live in a "post-traditional society" (Giddens 1994). This thesis, crudely expressed, suggests both that modernity is radically different from tradition and that the processes of modernization overwhelm traditional orders, leading to the development of a totally different type of society.

Advocates of the coexistence thesis, such as Timothy Luke (1996), argue that there always elements of reflexivity in so-called "traditional" societies and stable norms in so- called "modern societies." In other words, there are always elements of modernity in traditional cultures and tradition in contemporary societies. Traditions are not static and fixed and modernity is not in constant flux. Rather than teasing out the involved theoretical debate here, I will base my ideas on the concept proposed by Raymond Williams (1997, 6) that cultures are both "traditional and creative." In other words, cultures are characterized by both continuity and change.

There is a precedent for remixing *kīrtan*. While the lyrics of *bhajans* and *mantra* are relatively fixed, the melodies are not. In his study of popular *kīrtan* in Benares, Stephen Slawek (1988, 79) notes that the melodies of the *bhajans* sung by the villagers are often derived from Bollywood film music. In pilgrimage places, such as Rishikesh in North India, stalls sell CDs of *bhajans*. Devotional music accounts for about eight percent of music sales (Kasbekar 2006, 27). While many of these CDs have a traditional musical accompaniment—such as harmonium and tabla—or Bollywood-style music, there are an increasing number of CDs of *bhajans* that have electronic or rock backing to appeal to young Hindus who have been increasingly exposed to Western style popular music. For example, Sahil Jagtiani released a CD in 2009 called *Cosmic Trance: Bhajans for the Youth*, which sets a number of well-known devotional chants to an electronic dance beat. This might be identified as the reinvention of tradition in that *Cosmic Trance* is rooted in the past, yet transformed to make this devotional tradition seem more contemporary. Both these examples can be typified as hybrid cultural forms. Drawing on the work of Garcia-Canclini, Marwan Kraidy (2005, 63) observes that "everyday life eclecticism" challenges "the binary opposition between 'tradition' and 'modernity.'"

When thinking about yoga jams and raves, we can identify a continuity by tracing what Guy Beck (1993) has called a sonic theology—the interpretation and apprehension of the sacred through sound. This sonic theology can be traced back to the Vedic period, and through the importance of devotional music in the *bhakti* traditions to yoga raves and remixed *bhajans*. Bhavini observed,

> There is a power and a secret behind the mantras. All of these mantras are so heavily charged having been chanted for thousands of years. The vibrations raise the energy, raise the *prana*,[12] and that is what we are doing with Yoga Jam. (Personal interview July 2013)

In other words, the potency of *mantras* is derived from the conception that there has been an unbroken tradition of chanting, which can be traced back through the mists of time. In many ways, while the phenomenon of yoga raves/jams is new, the idea that certain combinations of sounds have power is consistent with Vedic sonic theology. While mantras are diverse in both form and function, underlying the concept of *mantra* is the idea that certain sounds have power. Alper (1991, 7–8) suggests a spectrum with what he calls "quotidian

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intent" at one pole—which suggests that *mantras* have a magical power to achieve specific ends, such as curing barrenness—and "redemptive intent" at the other—which is the idea that *mantras* have a religious power to achieve transcendental ends. I suggest that yoga jams and raves posit a third power of the chanting of *mantras,* which I call therapeutic intent—which suggests that *mantras* have the power to create a sense of wellbeing. Sachin explained to me that *bhajans* and *mantras* are uplifting because they have the power to "increase your consciousness, increase your energy (*prana*), increase your wellbeing." The underlying concept of yoga jams and raves transforms the sonic theology of *nāda brahmā hai*—sound is God (Slawek 1988, 83)—into a sonic therapeutic spirituality in which sound is conceived as connecting individuals to their authentic inner selves and to others, therefore cultivating a sense of wellbeing, and consequently contributing to AOL's aspiration to create a "stress-free, violence-free society."

Yoga jams/raves are represented as being authentic because they are rooted in a romanticized and imagined ancient Indian culture. Traditional practices are often dismissed, as they are perceived as being irrational and therefore incommensurate with modernity. However, yoga jams are represented as being both traditional and rational. Sachin indicated,

> It is all to do with energy; it is all based in physics. The vibrations and the energy [produced] when you chant certain sounds have a very positive uplifting effect. (Personal interview July 2013)

The implication is that the sonic qualities, the vibrations, of *mantras* are critical, and not necessarily the meaning. The sonic qualities of mantras are articulated not only in terms of an authentic tradition that has existed for "thousands of years," but also by an appeal to both experience and physics. Frits Staal (1991) argues that *mantras* are fundamentally meaningless—they are not translatable, they have no semantic content as such, and the potency exists in the sound itself and the ritual context. Gerardus Van der Leeuw (cited in Beck 1993, 34) suggested that "incomprehensibility enhances the numinous power" of sonic phenomena such as the mystical syllable OM. Although many of the *mantras* at yoga jams can be translated, it does not matter that most participants do not understand. Sachin suggested that "people leave their intellect at the door. It is going beyond [the intellect] and allowing the vibrations to take you" (personal interview August 2013).

Of course, the context here is not the Vedic ritual, the *kīrtan* of the *bhakti* traditions, or even the congregational gatherings (*satsangs*) of contemporary Hindu movements. Yoga Jam can be considered as a ritual event that takes the traditional idea of sonic theology and transforms it to produce a thoroughly modern sonic liturgy. Consequently, yoga raves/ jams represent both continuity and change. Yoga jams are rooted in an imagined tradition, yet at the same time, they are represented as entirely contemporaneous. Ancient Sanskrit *mantras* are relevant to today because their sonic properties are perceived as having particularly potent vibrations that have the capacity to transform consciousness without the use of potentially harmful mind-altering drugs.

Conclusion

Yoga raves/jams are still much more prevalent in Art of Living than in any other group. There are four main reasons for this—first, AOL itself can be considered a hybrid phenomenon; second, it is a transnational movement; third, it makes a conscious effort to appeal to young people; and finally, AOL represents itself in terms of creating happiness and celebrating life as an inherent aspect of spirituality. As many of my informants within AOL indicate, one of

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Sri Sri Ravi Shankar's key objectives is to bring spirituality to young people, and what better way than through a familiar, albeit transformed, popular cultural form. Bhavini indicated that "young people like going out, they like trendy things," and yoga jams enable young people to have "a clublike experience with music, DJs and a band, but also have that spiritual aspect of yoga, meditation and Sanskrit chanting."

While yoga and rave initially appear to be contradictory cultural phenomena, yoga raves/jams make sense if the apparent dichotomies between the sacred and the secular; tradition and modernity are challenged. There is a growing body of work (see for example Coats and Emerich 2016; Clark and Clanton 2012; Ostwalt 2012; Mazur and McCarthy 2011) that understands that religion is not a separate and distinct phenomenon, but is deeply entwined with other cultural phenomena. As Colleen McDannell (2012, 135) argues, "the assumption that true Christian sentiment can be, must be set apart from the profane cannot be upheld when we look at how people use material culture in their religious life." The Durkheimian distinction between the sacred and the profane is even less plausible in Hindu-derived meditation movements such as AOL, which represents itself in terms of spirituality, rather than as a religion. The discourses of wellbeing spirituality are often articulated in terms of holistic lifestyles; consequently, all aspects of culture can be compatible with the spiritual lifestyle.

Yoga raves and jams can be considered as reinventions of traditions. Traditions are always dynamic and not static—characterized by both continuity and change. Yoga jams and raves are the latest dynamic manifestation of Hindu sonic liturgy, which can be traced back to the importance of sound in the Vedic ritual and the ecstatic music of Hindu devotional groups. Dance is also significant as an aspect of Hindu tradition—and yoga raves might be understood as a modern reinterpretation of the *rāsa līlā* of Krishna and the *gopis*, in which sound and movement are conceived as means for accessing the sacred. For yoga ravers, dance and music are tools for accessing the inner authentic self.

Spirituality, as Coats and Emerich (2016, 7) point out, involves "embodied relational practices that are mundane and mysterious, everyday and enchanted." There is no better exemplar of the apparent contradictory nature of spirituality than yoga jams. In the yoga jam/rave phenomenon, the sacred is embedded in the quotidian, the transcendent manifests through somatic practices, the universal is authenticated through the particular, the modern is articulated with ancient tradition, and Eastern religious ideas and practices are synthesized with Western revelry for a young cosmopolitan constituency seeking authentic experiences. Yoga Jams transform a thin cosmopolitanism into a meaningful practice by articulating an abstract wellbeing discourse with the sonic theology of the Vedic tradition. Verifiable personal and individual experiences of participating in the Yoga Jam are spiritually real, not only because of the therapeutic emphasis on "I feel" but also because this feeling can be rooted in the reinvented Vedic tradition.

Notes

1. The Vedic period refers to the period when the ancient Hindu texts known as the Vedas were composed and were the primary source of religious beliefs and practices. The Vedic period is generally believed to have lasted from roughly 1500 BCE to 500 CE, although there is considerable debate about these dates.
2. Emphasis in the original.
3. My thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pointing out this article to me.
4. This band was originally called Bhakti and primarily played acoustic instruments. When they were asked to play at the Pacha Night Club in New York "we took our entire set and reinvented it in a

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dance-rock format" (Manish Tandon talking on the video "The Butterthief Revolution," available at Butterthief 2014). As a consequence of this reinvention the band decided to rename themselves Butterthief. The name refers to the Hindu deity Krishna, who is often represented as a mischievous child with a love of butter.

5. There is no direct translation for the term Brahman—and Hindu philosophers endlessly debate the nature of Brahman—but it can best be understood as signifying the sacred ultimate reality and the ground of all being.
6. Emphasis in original.
7. Beck (2012, p. 133) suggests that although these terms are used interchangeably, technically *kīrtan* (from the Sanskrit *kīrti* to praise) refers to a song that praises a deity; whereas *bhajan* "refers to a song that results in personal communion or emotional exchange with the divine."
8. AOL runs numerous charitable projects; it presents itself as a humanitarian NGO engaged in stress management. Prison Smart—which stands for stress management and prison rehabilitation training—is one of AOL's main projects. It involves teaching the basic AOL techniques in prisons with the aim of reducing stress and recidivism (see Jacobs 2015, 115–116).
9. Eliade contrasts enstasis, which he equates with the meditative state known as *samadhi*, with ecstasy, which he indicates connotes "standing outside," which he equates with the shamanic journey through the spiritual dimension (see Eliade 1989a, 417)
10. Under colonial rule there was a perception that the temple dancers (*devadasis*) were little more than prostitutes, and while there is some support for this perception, this was by no means universally true. Nonetheless, this perception led to the prohibition of dance within the sacred precincts of the temple. However, various forms of dance—particularly Bharata Natyam—were preserved, but became aesthetic performances in theatres, rather than sacred acts in temples. Classical dance forms, such as Bharata Natyam, have now come to represent high culture, and almost all India tourist literature has one image of a dancer in a brightly coloured sari holding a typical Bharata Natyam pose.
11. *Sattva, tamas,* and *rajas* are regarded as the three qualities of nature and are collectively referred to as the *guṇas.*
12. *Prana* literally translates as breath, but really refers to a sort of spiritual life force that flows through the subtle channels of what Gavin Flood (1996, 98) calls an esoteric anatomy.

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